

Synagogue Architecture as Metaphor: Standing Out or Blending In

Amy H. Crain

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"Artifice and Authenticity in Architecture! To Play or Not to Play?"

INTRODUCTION

As the preeminent symbol of Judaism in the New World, and the center of Jewish life and community identity, synagogue architecture expresses the social history of American Jews.

Civil and religious freedom meant that Jews could participate equally in the nineteenth century westward expansion of the United States. Jews in the American West achieved a more significant degree of assimilation, integration, and acceptance than that experienced by their associates in the East. Actively involved in commerce, politics, fraternal societies, and charitable organizations, virtually the only areas where western Jews did not mix freely with their Gentile neighbors were in the house of worship and in the burial ground. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews in the American West were the freest anywhere in the world. The synagogue became the architectural expression of their status.

JEWISH SYMBOLISM

By 1851, San Francisco had two congregations, Sherith Israel and Emanu-El, in part due to differences of opinion regarding religious ritual and attitudes toward reform. The split happened so early in San Francisco's Jewish history that no source clearly identifies which congregation preceded the other. Not long after, a group of first-generation California Jews split from Emanu-El and created Congregation Ohabai Shalome. This calls to mind an old joke about the Jewish castaway, alone for twenty years on a deserted island, who showed his rescuers two synagogues. When asked why he built two, his response was, "This is the temple I attend. That other place? Hah! I wouldn't set foot in that other temple if you PAID me!"

As each congregation outgrew its first, modest building, subsequent buildings were constructed in various historical revival styles that made full use of Jewish symbolism. Buildings with flamboyant, exotic, elaborate towers and domes on a grand scale celebrated the congregations' freedom, confidence, and acceptance in the community.

By the mid twentieth century, notwithstanding some notable exceptions, synagogue architecture downplayed its public face. As had been the case in centuries past, synagogues became almost indistinguishable from other houses of worship, and in some cases, their residential neighbors. Brick boxes, steel cubes, modern fortresses with high windows use little to no external Jewish symbolism. Was it a response to world events, changes in architectural style, a greater focus on the interior sacred space, or something else? Was the exterior difference no longer needed, or no longer desired? Was blending in the intent or the result? How mindful is the desire to blend in—to hide in plain sight—following the horrors of World War II and American anti-Semitism in the modern era?

When I first proposed the topic to one of my mentors, his response was,

The idea of a mid-20th century temple/synagogue fitting in, showing how comfortable yet anonymous Jews had come to feel, is perhaps a product of the city itself having aged, and that all groups feeling like long-term residents should not have to stand out, to express civic pride in building new places. But such a conjecture requires evidence. You would need a troop of flies on the wall at innumerable synagogue board meetings.

In the absence of flies on the wall, I offer you the following thoughts on artifice and authenticity in synagogue architecture. Artifice, “a skillful or artful contrivance or expedient,” remains a component of synagogue architecture. As the design becomes externally less distinctive, is it less authentic? Or is it perhaps a more authentic response to the needs of each congregation as contemporary American Jewish social history plays out, including issues such as civil rights, anti-Semitism, spirituality, and what it means to be an American Jew.

Congregation Emanu-El's Sutter Street Temple, dedicated in 1866, was one of the first buildings to display Jewish symbols conspicuously and in profusion, on the exterior; it may have been the first building in the West to have done so. Architect William Patton, an Englishman trained by Gothic revivalist Sir Gilbert Scott, placed monumental Shields of David, the six-pointed star, within round arches, in panels at the base of the towers, and in the windows on the sides of the towers. Between the towers, at the crest of the central gable, more than 100 feet above the ground and on view to all the city, were the stone Tablets of the Law, the Ten Commandments. The towers were crowned with pomegranate capitals, sheathed in bronze, tipped in gold, visible for miles. The Hebrew term for the head pieces, or capitals, of the Torah is *rimmonim*, which literally means “pomegranates.” Coincidence, or intention? With the central window displaying the Shield of David perceived as a breastplate, the building could be read as a symbolic representation of the Torah. In this mid nineteenth century conception of Jewish architecture, Patton, who was not Jewish, made the Jewish symbol “inseparable from basic structure, and exuberantly displayed in an expression of religious freedom.”¹

Architect Moses J. Lyon is believed to have been the first Jewish licensed architect in San Francisco. He also attempted to create a Jewish style of architecture, equally grandiose and unique, with a degree of competition rooted in the rivalry between the congregations. Lyon mixed elements of Romanesque, Moorish, and Venetian Gothic Revivals, including reproduction of a portion of the Venetian Doge's Palace. The twin minarets were smaller versions of Emanu-El's towers with pomegranate capitals. Lyon translated marble and metalwork into redwood, painted and scored. The Ten Commandments were among an intricate display of Jewish symbols between the towers. The Ohabai Shalome synagogue outlived its congregation, and was eventually rehabilitated as an assisted living center, without the Jewish symbols. It is the oldest extant synagogue in San Francisco, and one of the last remaining synagogues in the United States with Moorish influence.

The Ohabai Shalome and Emanu-El synagogues survived the 1906 Earthquake and Fire with damage, particularly to the towers. Twenty years later, Congregation Emanu-El moved further west and built a new synagogue in the Byzantine Revival style with a great dome. Congregation Sherith Israel had already built a domed synagogue in 1905, combining Beaux Arts, Byzantine, and Romanesque styles, complete with a stained glass window titled, “Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from Yosemite, and California transformed into the Promised Land.” Solid, conservative construction, and location outside the fire zone, enabled the synagogue to survive the earthquake with little damage. As the largest surviving public building in the city, it was among the first taken over for public use after the catastrophe, and served the Superior Courts between 1906 and 1908. Sherith Israel was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in the area of Law as the principal location of the San Francisco Graft Prosecution of 1906-1908, as well as for its architecture.²

The Byzantine Revival style became especially common for synagogues after World War I, including monumental and ornate synagogues built in the late 1920s in Portland and Los Angeles, still in use today. As was the case in San Francisco, initial construction was modest, followed by increasingly elaborate buildings in styles popular for their time. Portland's Congregation Beth Israel was founded in 1858, when Oregon was still part of the Oregon Territory. It was the first congregation west of the Rockies and north of California. Its third synagogue building, completed in 1928, is considered one of the finest examples of Byzantine architecture in the Northwest. Congregation B'nai B'rith, now known as Wilshire Boulevard Temple, was the first synagogue in Los Angeles, founded in 1862. Its third building, one of the most monumental and ornate examples of the domed style, was dedicated in 1929. The decision to locate the building beyond the streetcar line anticipated the increased suburbanization of American Jewish life. The richly ornamented interior, restored in 2013, features black marble, gold inlay, fine mosaics, rare woods, and Biblical themed murals created by Jewish artist and Hollywood art director Hugo Ballin. Sponsored by

three of the Warner Brothers, the murals reintroduced narrative, figurative art into the sanctuary. Because the second of the Ten Commandments forbids graven images, Jews had avoided iconography and figurative art for hundreds of years. The Wilshire Boulevard Temple murals initiated changes in Jewish attitudes toward synagogue art that emerged after World War II.

JEWISH ARCHITECTURE

Were late nineteenth and early twentieth century synagogues representative of Jewish architecture, or merely Jewish symbolism? What is Jewish architecture? Does Jewish architecture exist? For the better part of two thousand years, Jews made their home in other people's countries, and adopted other styles of architecture. Writing about post World War II Jewish architecture, History and Judaic Studies professor Gavriel Rosenfeld noted, "Dispersed among diverse countries around the world, the Jews developed an architecture of diversity rather than uniformity. For this reason, some scholars have offered the paradoxical conclusion that Jewish architecture is best defined as the absence of an identifiable style."³ Jewish architecture has meant something very different in Poland, China, New York, Charleston, San Francisco, and here in Ashland.

Jewish law does not require a synagogue building for the reading of the Torah, only a quorum of ten adults, identified as a *minyan*. For a religion essentially based on textual law, there is surprisingly little information in the texts about architectural requirements. Centuries of rabbinic commentary on the Torah acknowledge the symbolism of the synagogue. In recognition of its sanctity and central role in Jewish communal life, the synagogue building was to be ideally the tallest in a city, and even the ruins must be treated with respect.

Three internal architectural elements are always present: an ark to house the Torah scroll(s), a reading desk on which to open the scroll, and an eternal light, originally oil, usually electric, and occasionally solar powered in the twenty-first century. The spatial relationship among the elements varies and can be adapted to numerous architectural designs, allowing synagogue interiors and exteriors to be shaped in large part by local circumstances. Traditionally, synagogues in Europe and the Americas have been oriented toward the east, toward Jerusalem, signifying the connection of the Jewish people with the Land of Israel and their longing for an end of exile.⁴

Per Dr. Rosenfeld, with regard to local circumstances,

One of the most important was the Jews' level of integration into the societies in which they lived. When Jews suffered persecution, their anxieties led them to avoid overt expressions of religious particularism and build inconspicuously according to local traditions. Where they enjoyed greater security, by contrast, Jews felt more confident about articulating a distinct sense of religious identity in architectural form. As a result, the Jewishness of synagogue architecture varied considerably from the Middle Ages into the modern period... Only in the modern era would Jews widely come to enjoy the freedom and security necessary for genuine architectural innovation.⁵

As equal citizens under American law, Jewish immigrants were entitled to a full range of civil and political rights never previously available in the countries from which they came. This equality meant that in America Jews could be recognized as individuals, rather than members of a corporate body. Corporate membership had previously required that Jews belong to a synagogue. Individual recognition under the law meant that a Jew was no longer obligated to remain a member of the synagogue in which his circumstances placed him, because he had the freedom to change his circumstances. He could join another synagogue, or forego regular attendance at religious services without civil penalty.

When affiliation became voluntary, acquiring and keeping members and supporters led to the evolution of the synagogue into a multifunctional building: a house of prayer, a house of assembly, and a house of study. Uniquely American, the multipurpose synagogue-center endeavored to connect with Jews who were thoroughly acculturated in America, and to re-engage them and their children with Judaism. Known colloquially as a "shul with a pool,"⁶ the synagogue-center was a designed response to the conundrum of "how to resolve the tension between a secular Jewish social identity and a Jewish religious identity."⁷

MODERN ARCHITECTURE, MODERN IDENTITY

After World War II, in order to keep their congregants who were relocating to the suburbs, many urban congregations joined the exodus. Architects, designers, and the building committees that hired them enthusiastically responded to modern architecture. Modernism offered efficiency, economy, and flexibility. Perhaps more importantly, for those ready to put history and historical style behind them, Modernism expedited the expression of a modern Jewish identity in postwar Jewish America.

In her study of Louis Kahn's midcentury design for a Philadelphia synagogue, Susan Solomon noted,

Modern architecture succeeded in an American Jewish context because Jewish leaders... proclaimed that it meshed with what they saw as the forward-thinking nature of American Judaism. Modernism offered congregations a chance for physical representation of their own progressive ideals, and Jews, who had reason to be ambivalent about architecture, embraced it and its modern vocabulary. The synagogue building proclaimed that Jews were a visible part of American society; they had truly "arrived" in the suburbs. Their new religious homes were as bold as their synagogue's religious, social, and educational activities.⁸

In 2014, The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco presented *Designing Home: Jews and Midcentury Modernism*, the first exhibition to explore the Jewish contribution to Modernism. In the accompanying catalog, Guest Curator Donald Albrecht wrote,

Designing Home: Jews and Midcentury Modernism highlights the role of Jewish architects and designers in the creation of a distinctly modern American domestic landscape... Why these postwar American Jewish architects and designers should embrace modernism and why they did—in numbers disproportionate to the small percentage of Jews in the United States—was widely discussed by practitioners, critics, and religious leaders at the time. In the sphere of religious architecture and decoration, for example, influential members of the Reform Judaism movement succeeded in encouraging Jewish congregations to hire modern architects for new synagogues being built in suburbia as a way to move beyond the past and express a modern Jewish identity in postwar America.... Erich Mendelsohn, a Jewish architect who immigrated to the United States during the early 1940s, felt that adopting modern architecture made Jews "full participants in this momentous period of America's history."⁹

Writing on the exhibit, Jenna Weissman Joselit noted, "...modernism became, quite literally, the public face of postwar American Judaism."¹⁰ *Commentary*, a Jewish monthly opinion magazine still in publication, hosted an informal symposium on synagogue architecture in 1947. Each contributor to the discussion advocated a modern approach to synagogue architecture. Art historian Frank Landsberger offered, "This new modern style commends itself particularly to us as Jews. It avoids over-ornamentation in order not to obscure the functional purpose of the building, but rather to give it greater emphasis. It parallels our striving toward clarity and truth in our religious thinking."¹¹

Ely Jacques Kahn spoke out against the use of historical revival styles, "It is incredible that really honest designers should have the effrontery to advise a quasi-Gothic, Moorish, or any other sort of historical potpourri as an expression of Jewish culture." He went on to discuss character and materials,

Does the Jewish building want to shrink into its surroundings and be unobtrusive, or should it be proudly imposing, with a wealth of detail and expensive ornament? If the architect feels, as does the author, that modesty and natural beauty should dominate, he might well create a block, simple and beautifully proportioned and set off by attractive planting, so that the worshiper can step into a quiet atmosphere of dignity and restraint.¹²

During the latter half of the twentieth century many architects followed this block approach. They depended on applied Jewish art and decoration, usually on the interior, to differentiate synagogues from other expressions of institutional modernism. Other architects took the heroic or metaphorical approach,

relying on the physical embodiment of symbols, or biblical or historical references. Perhaps the most famous of these is Frank Lloyd Wright's Beth Shalom Synagogue in Elkins Park, just outside of Philadelphia. Although outside the geographical focus of this study, Wright's only synagogue merits mention for the designers' approach that runs counter to hundreds of uninspired and less identifiable synagogues. "Designers" plural, because Beth Shalom was the only project where Wright acknowledged a co-designer, Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen.

Gavriel Rosenfeld's review of Joseph Siry's *Beth Sholom Synagogue: Frank Lloyd Wright and Modern Religious Architecture*, summarized,

Cohen was unusual among postwar American rabbis in taking a direct role in the design of his sanctuary. Like other postwar rabbis who were moving older urban congregations to new suburban settings, he rejected the derivative historicist designs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and aimed for a synagogue that was distinctively modern. Yet because Cohen also wanted it to be identifiably Jewish, he sought out Wright, whose "organic" brand of architecture was opposed to the sterile machine aesthetic of the International Style, and allowed for the great expression of symbolic content. Following extended discussions in which Cohen made suggestions to Wright about everything from the synagogue's plan to its interior furnishings, the two men agreed on an elaborate symbolic agenda for the structure. Beth Sholom was designed to evoke the site where Judaism first began: Mount Sinai.¹³

In his proposal to Wright, Rabbi Cohen wrote, "Judaism has been and is a democratic religion whose leaders are not set apart from the congregations, but lead and guide from the very midst...In spirit, Judaism is so close to the American democratic spirit that we need a new type of Synagogue to express this remarkable spiritual fact." That resonated with Wright, he accepted the commission, and at a fundraising dinner, stated, "I said I would design an American Synagogue for Jews in America, but I would not design a Jewish Synagogue."¹⁴

In his remarks delivered at the building's fiftieth anniversary Paul Goldberger concluded,

Obviously Beth Sholom is not a typical building of its time or its place, but in the sense that it connects to the broader culture of which it is a part, it is still consistent with synagogue history, in that it is part of a larger architectural story. That's the key point—that the synagogue as a building type is part of the larger architectural story, not a story separate unto itself. I think this underscores the point Rabbi Cohen was trying to make in his initial letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, implying that there is something in Jewish attitude as well as Jewish ritual, particularly when you set it within an American cultural context, that seems to be a natural fit with the openness and directness and clarity of modernist architecture. Rabbi Cohen may have meant to flatter Frank Lloyd Wright into taking the commission, but he was onto something anyway in his attempt to connect Jewish tradition to the broader American culture.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Buildings constructed to make a statement, or for maximum attendance on the three holiest days of the year, tend to be less comfortable and less usable most of the year. A return to spirituality and a desire for community, intimacy, and inclusiveness as parts of spiritual practice have led in some cases to the construction of smaller buildings. Congregations that have retained monumental, historic buildings have added more intimate chapels, educational, and community service-focused spaces, either through rehabilitation or new construction.

As the multipurpose synagogue-center helps American Jews find a balance between a secular Jewish social identity and a Jewish religious identity, so do efforts to respond to modern environmental, social, and ethical issues. Synagogues across the country are building new or renovating existing facilities to be energy efficient and green friendly, earning certifications from Energy Star, and Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design known as LEED. Religious leaders recognize a moral imperative to build an environmentally conscious building. From the eclectic, historical revival style of one hundred fifty years

ago to award-winning environmental design, currency with American architectural trends is part of the public face of American Judaism.

STANDING OUT OR BLENDING IN? YES

By standing out, by eagerly embracing American architectural trends, American Jews and their synagogues are effectively blending in. As noted by Henry and Daniel Stolzman, in their study of American synagogue architecture,

Synagogues readily adopted American design trends, so much so that they sometimes resemble other, non-Jewish religious buildings built during the same period. For many congregations, the use of the latest architectural fashion was a proud symbol of Jews' integration into society.¹⁶

As Judaism in America evolves, American synagogue buildings symbolize new values, new ways of life, new religious practices, and an ever changing balance between a secular Jewish social identity and a Jewish religious identity.

NOTES

¹ Allan Temko, "Temple Emanu-El of San Francisco: A Glory of the West," *Commentary* August 1, 1958 <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/temple-emanu-el-of-san-francisco-a-glory-of-the-west/> (accessed June 4, 2015).

² Michael R. Corbett, "Temple Sherith Israel," National Register of Historic Places Draft Nomination, 2010, 12.

³ Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, "Postwar Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust" in *Jewish Dimensions in Modern Visual Culture: Antisemitism, Assimilation, Affirmation*, eds. Rose-Carol Washton Long, Matthew Baigell, and Milly Heyd (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 2010), 285-302.

⁴ Lee Shai Weissbach, "Buildings Fraught with Meaning: An Introduction to a Special Issue on Synagogue Architecture in Context," *Jewish History* (February 2011) 25: 1-11 <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10835-010-9125-8#> (accessed June 24, 2015).

⁵ Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Building After Auschwitz: Jewish Architecture and the Memory of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 18-19.

⁶ *Shul* is another name for synagogue, from the Yiddish word for school; Yiddish being the medieval German-based language of European Jews.

⁷ Weissbach, "Buildings Fraught with Meaning." <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10835-010-9125-8#> (accessed June 24, 2015).

⁸ Susan G. Solomon, *Louis I. Kahn's Jewish Architecture: Mikveh Israel and the Midcentury American Synagogue* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 2009), 10.

⁹ Donald Albrecht, "Avant-Garde Belongs Neither to Gentile Nor Jew," in *Designing Home: Jews and Midcentury Modernism* (San Francisco: The Contemporary Jewish Museum, 2014), 13-27.

¹⁰ Jenna Weissman Joselit, "Thoroughly Modernist Jewish Design," *Forward* June 14, 2014 <http://forward.com/culture/199812/thoroughly-modernist-jewish-design/> (accessed June 5, 2015).

¹¹ Franz Landsberger, "Creating a Modern Synagogue Style: Expressive of America," *Commentary* June 1, 1947 <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/creating-a-modern-synagogue-style-expressive-of-america/> (accessed July 7, 2015).

¹² Ely Jacques Kahn, "Creating a Modern Synagogue Style: No More Copying," *Commentary* June 1, 1947 <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/creating-a-modern-synagogue-style-no-more-copying/> (accessed July 7, 2015).

¹³ Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, "Ironies Behind A Stunning Synagogue," *Forward* January 19, 2012 <http://forward.com/culture/149817/ironies-behind-a-stunning-synagogue/?p=2&p=2> (accessed June 24, 2015).

¹⁴ Paul Goldberger, "Remarks delivered at the 50th anniversary celebration of Frank Lloyd Wright's Beth Shalom Synagogue" November 15, 2009 <http://www.paulgoldberger.com/lectures/remarks-delivered-at-the-50th-anniversary-celebration-of-frank-lloyd-wrights-beth-shalom-synagogue/> (accessed June 23, 2015).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Henry & Daniel Stolzman, *Synagogue Architecture in America: Faith, Spirit & Identity* (Victoria, Australia: The Images Publishing Group Pty Ltd, 2004), 71.

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